Chapter 1.
The Limits of Top-Down Approaches to Community-Based Child Protection Mechanisms

The global Child Protection Minimum Standards define child protection as "the prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence against children."[1] Most child protection workers agree on the importance of top-down steps, which are initiated and guided by authorities, in the strengthening of comprehensive child protection systems.

Child protection systems typically stand on a foundation of child rights instruments, laws, and policies that prohibit violations against children, such as rape and other forms of sexual abuse, early marriage, assault and bullying, trafficking, dangerous labor, and recruitment into armed forces and armed groups, among many others.

The value of such prohibitions derives in no small part from the fact that they are imposed by authorities. In fact, laws and policies that aim to protect children lose their value if authorities do not enforce them in a uniform and fair manner. At the community level, too, top-down approaches have their value and place.

The purpose of this chapter is to help readers step back from current practice, in which top-down approaches are dominant, and reflect on the limits of such approaches. The objectives are to:

- show the value of top-down, expert-led approaches in particular settings; and
- to increase understanding of how these approaches are limited.

The latter point includes how top-down approaches evoke low levels of community ownership, increase dependency, do too little on prevention, and do not help local people to develop their own sustainable solutions to problems of child protection and well-being.

Key Question for Practitioners

Is my agency's way of working too top-down, and what could I do to help strengthen its community engagement and ownership?

Relevant tools from the Toolkit: Facilitation: FAC1; Training: TRN 1 & TRN 2; Management: MGM 1 & 2.

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[1] Child Protection Working Group (2012), p. 13.

Top-Down, Community-Based Approaches

Emergency situations clearly illustrate the need for top-down approaches. Imagine that a major earthquake devastates a crowded urban area in a country that is already racked by chronic poverty, weak governance, and a paucity of supports for vulnerable children. In the blink of an eye, masses of families become homeless and large numbers of children become unaccompanied or separated.

As people live on the streets or take refuge in camps that have been temporarily set up, or in whatever neighborhoods remain, children are subjected to risks such as family separation, exposure to live electrical wires and unstable structures, sexual exploitation and violence, discrimination, neglect or lack of proper care, psychosocial distress, and use of harmful substances. Lacking food, some children take to stealing, bringing them into conflict with the law. Although the need for basic necessities and social supports is enormous, the earthquake has badly disrupted services, damaged the social fabric, and worsened poverty, thereby aggravating all of the problems mentioned above.

The urgency of the situation demands immediate, effective action, mitigating against a slower, highly participatory approach. Some of the greatest risks to children arise near where they live— in their community setting. Families can meet some of children's protection needs, but by themselves cannot always meet these needs, especially in such a context. When existing social structures and processes are not operative, having effective community-based child protection mechanisms in place is a high priority.

This type of emergency context demands immediate action. Such action is often taken through top-down approaches to child protection at community or grassroots level. Typically, in these situations an international non-governmental organization (NGO) assesses the main child protection risks and then enables the formation and capacity-building of a Child Welfare Committee (CWC, sometimes called a Child Protection Committee) in consultation with local people. A CWC might consist of 10–15 community members (or members of the displaced, affected group) who, following training, monitor the risks to children, report serious violations against children (e.g., rape of a child) to authorities, work locally to prevent abuses to children, and enable grassroots supports such as non-formal, psychosocial support for affected children.

A CWC is a community-based child protection mechanism since it operates at community level and the activities are carried out by community members. This is a partnership approach insofar as the NGO and community members work together to achieve the common goal of protecting children.

This approach is top-down in several respects. Typically, it is the NGO that initiates, defines the problem, guides the planning and implementation, and also evaluates its success or lack thereof. Community members are consulted and participate, but the work is defined and often led by external, expert child protection workers who define priorities, indicate that CWCs are needed, and provide relevant training and follow-up support for community CWC members.

Perhaps most importantly, the NGO holds the power and takes the key decisions. Imagine, for example, that an assessment has indicated child-beating as a significant risk to children, but community members say that child-beating is not a problem since parents and teachers need to discipline unruly children and teach them appropriate values and respect for authority. The NGO child protection workers would likely try to teach local people about child rights and the harm caused to children by corporal punishment. They would also likely persuade community leaders to accept that child-beating needs to be addressed, or they would even make willingness to address this issue a condition for partnering with the NGO.

Particularly in desperate circumstances, most communities want to partner with external NGOs in the hope of securing material aid and better conditions for their families. Indeed, NGOs in such conditions wield significant power even without trying—the economic asymmetry between the NGO and affected communities makes communities eager to partner, willing to silence their own priorities and doubts, and compliant with NGO suggestions and approaches.

Top-down, community-based approaches such as those described in the example above are not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, they have several advantages, such as enabling rapid responses like reuniting unaccompanied children with their families. In addition to responding to violations against children, they may also reduce suffering and help to save lives in a highly dangerous situation in which there are no existing structures or group processes that can perform the functions of child protection.

Many agencies favor these approaches because they enable a rapid response to violations against children in a manner that is consistent with international child protection standards. Managers frequently prefer them because they follow fixed timetables and logframes and can be implemented according to standardized protocols. Also, they promise the kind of relatively quick results on a large scale that donors increasingly require. From this standpoint, it would be ill-advised to do away with top-down approaches.

An important point is that bottom-up and top-down approaches are not mutually exclusive but complementary. The wider task of strengthening national child protection systems requires a mixture of different kinds of work. Top-down approaches are necessary, for example, in establishing a framework of national laws and policies that prioritize, legitimate, and support the protection of children. Bottom-up approaches, meanwhile, are necessary for enabling sustainable supports for children's protection at grassroots level and building an environment of prevention. And middle-out efforts, such as work at municipal or district level to support child protection, are needed in order to foster connections between the grassroots and national elements of the child protection system and to promote congruence between these different elements.

From this standpoint, it would be misguided to focus solely, as the child protection sector has, on a top-down approach. The spirit of this Guide is that much more attention to bottom-up approaches is needed in order to strengthen child protection systems and achieve the wider humanitarian goal of sustainability.

Limits of Top-Down, Expert-Driven Approaches

Despite their advantages, top-down approaches have numerous limitations and problematic aspects. In terms of strengthening child protection systems, top-down approaches often lead to decontextualization in which outside models (such as those from the Anglo-Saxon world) are imposed in ways that do not fit the local context.[2] At the community level, significant limitations include relatively low levels of community ownership, self-silencing by community members, backlash, high levels of dependency, and low levels of sustainability.

Community Ownership

With regard to child protection, community ownership refers to the extent to which communities have strong concerns about children's issues, see particular work to support vulnerable children as their own, take primary responsibility for the success of that work, and engage in self-motivated action to improve children's lives. These elements of common concern, collective identity and responsibility, and internal motivation and initiative are typically weak when agencies use top-down approaches,[3] which concentrate power in the hands of an outside body such as an NGO.

A global review of community-based child protection mechanisms[4] found that community ownership was the most important determinant of the effectiveness of such measures. It also found, however, that most NGO-led interventions to establish and support Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) were top-down and achieved relatively low levels of community ownership.

Typically, community members described the work of NGO-led CWCs as being, for example, "a Save the Children project." Seeing the CWC primarily as the responsibility of an outside agency, local people did not exercise high levels of initiative and responsibility for it, nor did they mobilize community resources (such as land, space for meetings, etc.) in support of it. Ordinary people in the communities concerned were not highly motivated to participate in or support the work of the CWCs. When external funding for the CWC work ended, the CWCs tended to flounder or collapse entirely, a point that will be commented on further below.

In short, while there was significant community *participation* in the examples reviewed, there were low levels of community *ownership*. This was reflected in the highly selective participation of community members in child protection work. Community ownership entails high levels of participation and a keen sense of responsibility by diverse people, which is essential for describing something as a community process or action.

Yet the top-down formation of CWCs typically limits the discussion of children's situations to a limited number of people, mainly the CWC members. This gives the mistaken impression that

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[2] Forbes et al. (2016).

[3] Top-down approaches can generate significant levels of community ownership, when they help local people to do something they already want to do (for example, reunite unaccompanied children with their families).

[4] Wessells (2009).

child protection in the community is somehow handled by the CWC. It is as if general community members have no role, when in fact ordinary parents and citizens have very important roles to play in children's protection and well-being.

A key question, then, is: what enables or impedes community ownership? Table 1 below gives a snapshot of some of the main enablers of and obstacles to community ownership.

Table 1. Things That Enable or Block Community Ownership.

Enablers of Community Ownership	Obstacles to Community Ownership
Community has relatively high levels of power and control, and makes key decisions	Low power, control, and decision-making authority by community
Sense of collective responsibility for children's well-being	NGO-oriented engagement with community
Community people identify the work for children as their own	Community people identify the work for children as belonging to an NGO
Space for inclusive, collective dialogue and decision-making by community people, with patient cultivation by outside agency	Didactic, top-down approach that aims to achieve quick results
Motivation animated by collective concern and vision of helping vulnerable children	Mostly monetary motivation, with early introduction of large sums of money
Building on existing community resources, networks, and ideas	Ignoring local capacities and resources and emphasizing those introduced from the outside
Outside agency works as a catalyst, facilitator and co-learner, with community in the driver's seat	Outside agency works as an expert and authority that guides community toward the agency's viewpoint and approach

Unfortunately, the obstacles to community ownership shown in the right-hand column of Table 1 apply to many top-down approaches. In such approaches, NGOs hold the power and make the key decisions, and they engage with communities in ways that fit their priorities, mission, technical expertise, and funding. In essence, they encourage selected community members to partner with them to achieve particular outcomes.

This colors the engagement with communities, keeping the focus on what the agencies bring and can do rather than on the communities' power and resources. At best, this way of engaging regards communities as partners, but with limited power. At worst, this way of engaging is paternalistic and regards community members as passive victims or beneficiaries—people who are helped by NGOs but who themselves hold little real power. Money may be introduced early on to pay community people for their time and effort, and this may unintentionally emphasize

external resources and relationships over a community's concern for children as a source of motivation for getting involved.

These problems make it difficult to achieve deep community change in practices such as local people's use of corporal punishment to discipline their children. The prevention of such violations against children requires a slow process of internal dialogue, decision-making, and agreement to develop and use other approaches. Such a process of social change, however, can be undermined by the use of a top-down approach, which can produce problems such as self-silencing and dependency on outside actors.

Self-Silencing

By comparison with an impoverished community or group of local people, an international NGO holds enormous wealth and power. Even NGO vehicles and NGO workers' dress and manner of speaking tend to highlight this disparity of wealth and power.

Because the NGO child protection specialists who engage with the community are seen as being relatively well-educated, wealthy, and powerful, they may be seen as bringing with them Western science and a greater understanding than local people have. Even if the workers of a particular NGO say they are not bringing in large amounts of money, local people will likely know or have heard of people in other communities who have received considerable financial and material goods via the presence and work of an NGO.

This power differential can make it difficult for NGO workers and community members to engage in an authentic manner. Community members may be thinking: "Why are these NGO people talking about beating children, which is normal, when we do not have enough food or

proper shelter or health care?" However, they may be reluctant to say this out loud since that would violate local norms of hospitality. Local people may also "play along" with the NGO in the hope of gaining material aid that could benefit their families. They may silence their own desires, doubts, and views in order to please the NGO workers and keep them engaged in the community.

This self-silencing can limit people's voice and participation, and it can leave local people feeling disempowered and subjugated by the external agency. If local people feel disrespected and dominated by outsiders, reawakening the pain associated with colonialism, they will be less motivated to pour themselves into the project and achieve positive results on behalf of children. For the NGO, it may be difficult to know what local people really think, and the NGO workers may not look behind the power dynamics and reflect on how they may not be accurately hearing what community members actually think. This dynamic raises the possibility of a contrived partnership and game-playing, which will be unlikely to stimulate the rich community engagement and mobilization needed to ensure the success of the program.

Backlash

Top-down approaches to child protection may also produce backlash—negative reactions toward the NGO and/or its promoted activities that can undermine program effectiveness and sour relations with the NGO.

In post-war Sierra Leone, for example, NGOs frequently established Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) and "sensitized" local people about how child-beating harms children and the importance of supporting child rights. The intent was to support the implementation of the 2007 Child Rights Act, which had called for the establishment of a CWC in each village.

However, this top-down approach to introducing child rights produced backlash. In ethnographic research that asked many different Sierra Leoneans in two districts for the main harms to children, local people spontaneously identified "child rights" as one of the top ten harms. They said that the NGOs had taught child rights to young people, who subsequently reported parents who beat their children to the authorities. The adults complained bitterly that the NGOs had undermined their authority as parents, contributed to bad behavior among children, and taught children their rights without placing equal emphasis on their responsibilities. Similar findings have been reported in other studies, too.[5]

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[5] Behnam (2011); Child Frontiers (2010); Krueger et al. (2013).

Most likely, the backlash occurred not only because people disagreed with the prohibition against corporal punishment but also because it had been imposed on them from outside and conflicted with local social norms and cultural values.[6]

In Sierra Leone, a "well child" is one who is serious in school, obedient with parents, willing to help the family, and respectful of elders. To bring up a child properly is part of a web of interacting social and cultural obligations at different levels. Parents see it as their obligation to beat a disobedient child—this is what it means to be a "good parent" and a good member of the community. Parents also expect to be criticized by other parents if they do not beat an unruly child and teach him or her proper behavior.

Amidst these norms, the process of lecturing parents about what they are doing wrong and on the best way to parent can come across as artificial and disrespectful and ultimately will not have the intended outcome. These parents' sense of being disrespected stemmed also from the fact that most NGOs in Sierra Leone had apparently not taken the time to learn about local social norms and the values underlying them and to start by listening, asking questions, and respectfully encouraging and facilitating discussion.

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[6] Wessells (2015).

Poor Sustainability

Perhaps the greatest limitation of top-down approaches is their poor sustainability. NGO-facilitated CWCs have produced results, but CWCs seldom endure beyond the period of external funding.

Multiple factors may contribute to this unfortunate outcome. Top-down approaches tend to create dependency since they feature the role of external child protection agencies and experts who analyze the situation and prescribe an intervention to address child protection issues in the community. This mode of engagement sends a strong signal that child protection analysis and intervention is best guided by highly-educated, well-trained specialists.

Communities are not left out, but they are relegated to the back seat, since it is the experts who guide the analysis and take the decisions. Also, CWCs may become dependent on outside agencies for training and advice on how to handle difficult issues. The global review discussed above found that CWC members frequently identified inadequate training as a significant gap. At the end of the funding period, CWCs quietly ceased their work, in part because local people had become dependent on outside experts and agencies who had now moved on.

The most important cause of the poor sustainability of CWCs, however, is a low level of community ownership. Ordinary community members neither take responsibility for the child protection work nor see the work of the CWC as their own. Usually, they see the CWC as the work of an outside agency, which does not reflect the decision-making, power, and action of the local collective. Seeing it as an NGO project, they do not pour their creativity, energy, and resources into helping it to continue. As a result, when the project is over, the CWC flounders and eventually expires.

Weak Focus on Prevention

The strategy of working to protect children through CWCs is much stronger when it comes to response than to prevention.

As noted above, the strength of this kind of strategy is that there is a specified, hopefully well-prepared body—a CWC—that can respond appropriately to or, if necessary, refer to the appropriate body severe violations such as the rape of a child. In practice, the functionality of NGO-led CWCs tend to be quite varied with regard to their response.

Yet the functionality is even lower regarding prevention. At community level, one frequently hears national NGO practitioners bemoan the fact that they have taught people about the harms caused by practices such as corporal punishment and early marriage only to find that community people continue to engage in those practices. Frustrated, the workers may exclaim: "We sensitized them on that, but they still do it!"

The limited attention paid to—and success achieved with regard to—prevention is regrettable. It brings to mind the adage about people who live near a dangerous river that they often have to cross. It may be better to build a bridge upstream than to focus only on rescuing people who are about to drown.

The weakness of CWCs regarding prevention occurs because CWCs often run counter to the tide of local social norms, practices, and values. For a time, the top-down approach of imposing a CWC may seem to work. While the NGO is present, segments of the community may be willing to engage with the NGO on making the CWC functional, and the CWC may have active cases.

Subsequently, however, the weight of local norms leads most local people to circumvent the CWCs and to regard them as not very helpful "NGO projects."

In fact, many local people tend to see CWCs as outsider-led activities that do not reflect local values, beliefs, practices, and norms. Top-down approaches are weak with regards to key factors such as local ownership, adequately building on local strengths, and locally-guided change of social norms. Quite often, the interventions used do not fit the local context. As a result, they are limited in their effectiveness and sustainability.

Reflection on Implications

In light of these limitations, it is vital to seek alternatives that complement top-down approaches, offer a stronger way forward, and unleash the full creative power and agency of communities. Since reflection is the key to successful change, please take a moment to reflect quietly on the questions presented in the box below:

> **Questions for Reflection**
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> Have I or my agency used top-down approaches and CWCs in addressing child protection?
>
> What are some of the limits of this approach that I have seen?
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> How do I see CWCs?
>
> - Are they highly effective when it comes to prevention as well as response? Why or why not?
>
> - Do average community people tend to use and support CWCs?
>
> - Does the use of CWCs have unintended consequences? What are they?
>
> - Is the imposition of a CWC a fully respectful way of engaging with community members?
>
> - Am I open to alternative approaches?

Perhaps the time has come to develop and test alternative approaches that open new possibilities and avoid these limitations. Even if your agency has been invested in top-down approaches, our willingness to innovate and try out new approaches is an important element in being a good humanitarian and achieving accountability to the people we serve.

The new approaches set out in this Guide are best thought of as complements to rather than replacements for top-down approaches. Indeed, a bottom-up approach is not a "silver bullet" solution to be used in all circumstances. A significant challenge in the child protection sector is to find the appropriate balance between the use of different approaches, adapting this balance to fit individual contexts.